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ABSTRACT

A case study examined employee perceptions of the communication climate within a newspaper. Using qualitative and quantitative techniques, data were collected from 150 employees in 7 departments of a small newspaper organization, "Southwestern Newspapers". Results indicated that this newspaper can improve its communications climate by increasing the amount and frequency of internal communication at all levels. Findings also suggest that the publisher needs to develop strategies that will build personal and organizational trust in order to enhance organizational effectiveness. Managerial personnel need to be trained to develop strategies and techniques to help improve the organizational communication climate. (Seventeen references and four tables of data are attached.) (RS)

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A CASE STUDY OF NEWSPAPER EMPLOYEE PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNICATIONS VARIABLES RELATED TO ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE, IMMEDIATE SUPERVISOR AND TOP MANAGEMENT

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NEWSPAPER DIVISION

ABSTRACT

A CASE STUDY OF NEWSPAPER EMPLOYEE PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNICATIONS VARIABLES RELATED TO ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE, IMMEDIATE SUPERVISOR AND TOP MANAGEMENT

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In spite of findings in previous studies that superior-subordinate communication is as important in a media organization as other types of organizations, there have been very few studies of this important communications relationship in the context of the total communications climate within a newspaper.

This paper reports on a study designed to answer the following questions: What are employee perceptions of the communications climate within the newspaper? What are employee perceptions of the communications relationship between immediate supervisors/top management and subordinates? And, to what extent are perceptions of these communication relationships related to perceptions of the overall communications climate?

Using qualitative and quantitative techniques, data were collected from 150 employees in seven departments of a small newspaper organization. Qualitative methods involved conducting focus groups sessions with nearly 50 percent of all employees to discern employee perceptions of communication patterns, outcomes, relationships and content within the organization. The quantitative techniques included administering a 150 question measuring instrument, based on the Communication Audit Survey (CAS), to all employees. The CAS has a long history of use as a communications auditing tool and is designed to measure perceptions about communication sources, messages, channels and receivers within an organization.

The results indicate this newspaper can improve its communications climate by increasing the amount and frequency of internal communication at all levels. However, the results show the communication relationship most in need of attention involves the publisher. The data suggest he needs to develop strategies that will build personal and organizational trust in his communication in order to enhance organizational effectiveness.

In addition to reporting the results and conclusions of this case study, this paper offers several specific recommendations for mass media researchers interested in pursuing the investigation of communication within media organizations.

A CASE STUDY OF NEWSPAPER EMPLOYEE
PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNICATIONS VARIABLES RELATED TO
ORGANIZATIONAL CLIMATE, IMMEDIATE SUPERVISOR AND TOP MANAGEMENT

Because of the unique position accorded journalists in our society, there is a great deal of interest in the way they work and their attitudes about the job they perform.

This interest has resulted in comprehensive studies designed to examine personal and organizational variables thought to be related to job performance (Johnstone et al., 1976; Burgoon et al., 1982 and Weaver and Wilhoit, 1986). Also, as Beam (1988) notes, another major area of investigation has centered on the concept of professionalism as it relates to job performance.

Still another major research effort has focused on perceived job satisfaction as a key variable related to overall journalistic performance and products. These studies have been designed to develop tests to measure journalistic job satisfaction (Samuelson, 1962), examine job satisfaction among special segments of journalists (Barrett, 1984; Shaver, 1978), discern the relationship of job satisfaction to organization size (Bergen and Weaver, 1987), and look at the relationship of job satisfaction to winning journalistic prizes (Beam et al., 1986).

One persistent theme in the findings of many of these studies is the importance of various dimensions of the superior-subordinate relationship. For instance, Burgoon et al. (1982) found the degree of clarity of directives from supervisors and job autonomy together were the strongest predictors of job satisfaction among journalists they studied. Bergen and Weaver (1987) found when organization size is held constant, the second

strongest predictor of job satisfaction is how often individuals get reactions or comments on their work from superiors.

Not surprisingly this relationship has also been found to be important in more specific management studies of newspaper organizations. In a study of the management style of two large metropolitan dailies, Gaziano and Coulson (1987) found the majority of journalists expected a great deal of leadership from supervisors, but only a minority said leadership met expectations. In addition, more than three-fourths of the staffers they studied felt the most important goal of a good newspaper manager is to foster a thoughtful and caring attitude in relationships with employees.

In a study that focused on newsroom turnover and mobility at small dailies, Tharp (1988) found a major reason for employee dissatisfaction was a negative attitude toward supervisors. A large majority of respondents (85%) said they thought their supervisors didn't show confidence in staff members and over two thirds said their supervisors did not go out of their way to help.

The above results are consistent with the findings of non-media organizational communication research. For instance, Rosenberg (1985) reports that in a study of 10,000 employees in the United States and Canada, persons ranked immediate supervisors and top executives one and three, respectively, when asked to list preferred sources of organizational information.

Further, Pincus et al. (1988) say there is a growing body of research to suggest that an employee's communication relationship with his/her supervisor may play the major role in predicting an employee's job satisfaction. But they also note an employee's ability to participate in meaningful two-way communication with top-level management may rival communication with the immediate supervisor as a predictor of job satisfaction. They conclude that more studies should focus on both top management and superior-subordinate communication relationships within organizations to determine the effect on job performance.

In spite of the findings that superior-subordinate communication is as important in a media organization as other types of organizations, there have been very few studies of the communications climate in media organizations. Most often the "dependent variable" is job satisfaction and communication is examined as only one of many independent or predictor variables. Further, even when organizational communication or the communications climate is the focus, most studies have been limited to newspaper newsrooms (Fowler and Shipman, 1984).

This study extends the investigation of superior-subordinate communication in media organizations in two ways. First, this study looks at this important communication relationship in the context of the total communications climate within a print media organization and, second, employees in all departments--not just the newsroom--are included in the study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Approximately a year after undergoing some major top management changes, "Southwestern Newspapers" asked researchers to undertake a study of the communications climate within its organization. Serving 220,000 homes in a multi-county area, "Southwestern Newspapers" publishes a six-day-a-week newspaper, nine shoppers, two weekly tabloid entertainment inserts for the newspaper and offers a commercial printing and graphic design service.

While the study gathered data on a wide variety of communication and organizational variables, this paper reports the results of data analysis designed to answer the following research questions:

1. What are employee perceptions of the communications climate within the organization?

2. What are employee perceptions of the communications relationship between immediate supervisors and subordinates within the organization?

3. What are employee perceptions of the communications relationship between top management and subordinates within the organization?

4. To what extent are the employee perceptions of these communication relationships related to perceptions of the overall communications climate within the organization?

It is important to note that the research questions focus on communication rather than job satisfaction. However, as detailed above, there is a preponderance of research evidence to support a link between the two concepts.

Further, consistent with the recommendations of Pincus et al. (1988) this study highlights communication relationships between the employee and his/her immediate supervisor as well as between the employee and top management.

In most organizations it is relatively easy for an employee to identify his or her immediate supervisor. But, it is not always as easy for the employee to conceptualize "top management." In this study it was considered important to consider top management to be the publisher of "Southwestern Newspapers" for several reasons:

First, as noted above, "Southwestern Newspapers" had recently undergone some management changes. One of the changes involved the publisher who perceived he had a different communication and management style than the previous publisher and he was interested in an evaluation.

Second, partly because of tradition and partly due to law, a newspaper publisher often has a great deal of power in personnel matters. This is particularly true for small newspaper organizations. For instance, as Taylor (1988) explains in a study of newsroom employment policies, 85 percent of editors and reporters do not work under a written contract. As such, their employment is at-will and they have very little protection from seemingly arbitrary termination.

Further, it seems logical to assume (as with the chief executive of any organization) that the publisher is perceived as

setting the standard when it comes to organizational communication.

METHODOLOGY

"Southwestern Newspapers" is a complex organization employing 150 persons in seven departments (advertising sales, circulation, composition, distribution, editorial, office-clerical and press) in six locations throughout a multi-county coverage area. Consequently, in order to gather data necessary to answer the research questions it was considered important to develop a comprehensive process that would use both qualitative and quantitative methods.

The qualitative phase began in late Fall, 1987, when focus group sessions were held with approximately 50 percent of all employees. These lengthy meetings were structured to concentrate on employee perceptions of communication patterns, outcomes, relationships and content within the organization. As is common with focus group sessions, these encounters were tape recorded and the tapes were later transcribed to facilitate the identification of themes and issues.

The quantitative phase was completed in early 1988 when a 150 question measuring instrument, based on the Communication Audit Survey (once known as the ICA Audit Questionnaire) but customized in order to take into consideration themes and issues identified in the focus group sessions, was administered to all employees.

Designed to measure perceptions about communication sources, messages, channels and receivers within the organizational context, the Communication Audit Survey (CAS) has a long history of use since its development in the 1970s (Goldhaver and Rogers, 1979). While it has been criticized for not measuring structural variables (Grunig, 1985), Greenbaum et al. (1988) report researchers reviewing CAS applications find that it is a useful tool for identifying communication problems within an organization.

Customizing the CAS to allow for data collection on variables of particular interest to "Southwestern Newspapers" is consistent with a six-step process recently advocated by DeWine and James (1988) in order to develop client-centered recommendations after the communications audit has been completed.

The need to develop-client centered recommendations also guided data analysis. The CAS is scored on a five-point scale with 1 being "very little" and 5 being "very great." This allows for the creation of mean scores for each item as well as means for indexes or clusters of items that are considered to measure certain dimensions. Further, an advantage of the CAS (Greenbaum, et al., 1988) is that it provides for a needs analysis approach in that with several dimensions the current state of affairs is compared with the ideal state of the same dimension.

For instance, respondents are asked to indicate the amount of information received now from an immediate supervisor and then to indicate the amount of information they would <u>like</u> to receive

from the supervisor. Calculating the proportional relationship of the two means (referred to as a "needs index") provides an indication of the degree of need to improve in that area. A perfect value is 1.0--where the current state matches the ideal state. A value greater than 1.0 indicates employees do not receive as much information as they would like and a value less than 1.0 indicates they receive more information than they want.

Also, consistent with past administrations of the CAS (Greenbaum et al., 1988; DeWine and James, 1988), respondents were given the opportunity to elaborate on their perceptions of the communications climate within the organization in an "open-ended" question.

To answer the research questions for this paper, means of responses for all employees were first calculated for 10 dimensions that relate to the overall communications climate within "Southwestern Newspapers." Next, the means for indexes of all items dealing with "Immediate Supervisor" and "Publisher" were calculated for employees in each of the six departments. Finally, correlational analysis was used to determine the relationship of the Immediate Supervisor and Publisher indexes to a "grand mean" score of all items in the measuring instrument.

RESULTS

As the data in Table 1 show, there are disparities between the perceived "ideal" situation and the actual situation on the "amount" dimensions of the communications climate. Need indexes on these dimensions are: information received/want on various

topics, 1.45; information received/want from various sources, 1.33; information received/want through different channels, 1.27, and information sent/want-to-send, 1.21. Perceptions are more positive about the amount of follow-up/action taken on information sent and satisfaction with organizational communication relationships.

Analysis of the focus group and open-ended question data supports the contention that employees want more information. Specifically, employees said they do not receive enough information on problems management faces, new services or projects in the organization, what management thinks of their ideas, company goals or objectives, how job related problems are being handled, decisions that affect their jobs, technological changes affecting their job, specific project requirements and pay/benefits.

Also one perception related to these "amount" dimensions expressed frequently is that there is little communication between departments. One employee said, "Departments don't realize how interdependent we need to be. Printing affects comp and sales affects it all. Some people don't even know where departments are located in their own building." Another said, "We no longer have cross-departmental meetings. We used to and it helped to remind us that we're all working for the same organization."

Summaries of perceptual data related to Immediate Supervisors and the Publisher can be found in Tables 2 and 3. In general, employees have positive communication-related percep-

tions of their immediate supervisor and believe their relationship with him/her contributes to their overall satisfaction with the organization. Employees consider the information coming from their boss to be especially useful and accurate. They believe their immediate supervisor listens to them and are positive about the amount of action/follow-up taken on information sent their boss.

However, employees do not perceive their immediate supervisor as praising them when they do a good job and there is a disparity between the perceived "ideal" amount of information they want to receive from their boss and the actual amount received (a value of 1.32).

In contrast to the Immediate Supervisor/Boss, employees have a negative perception of their communication relationship with the Publisher. The Publisher has a high "Need Index" value on the amount of information received/wanted dimensions (1.67) and employees do not consider information they do receive from the publisher to be very timely. Also, they perceive of the amount of follow-up/action taken on information they send the Publisher to be low. Further, employees do not perceive their relationship with the Publisher as contributing to their overall satisfaction with "Southwestern Newspapers."

The data presented in Table 4 highlights the differences in perceptions between Immediate Supervisor and Publisher. With few exceptions, employees in the various departments rate their Immediate Supervisor positively and the Publisher negatively.

Office/Clerical workers and those in Distribution have slightly positive perceptions of both their Immediate Supervisor and the Publisher, while interestingly, Newsroom employees have negative perceptions of both their Immediate Supervisor and the Publisher.

The differences in perceptions of Immediate Supervisor and Publisher were evident in the qualitative data as well. One person wrote, "Communication depends mostly on your General Manager. The farther you are from the main office the better." Another said, "Our supervisor keeps us very well informed--everything is open--I like it like that."

Referring to the Publisher one person wrote, "Better communication from upper management is needed--more consistency and less pettiness. I don't look to management for help." Another said, "I don't think [the Publisher] would answer you about our competition, he would just brush you off." Still another said, "[The Publisher] seems to be open but you don't know where you stand with him. I don't know if I'm getting substance."

As noted earlier, at the time of the study the current Publisher was relatively new to the organization. Consequently, employees did not hesitate to compare his communication style with that of the previous publisher. One wrote, "[The former Publisher] had heavy written communication, he was organized and good on follow-through. He and [the current Publisher] are as different as night and day. [His] communication is a disaster--slowly deteriorating." Referring to the former Publisher another

said, "He was straightforward--he might not tell you everything you wanted to know--but you could believe him."

Correlational analysis confirmed the importance of employee perceptions of the Immediate Supervisor and Publisher communication relationship to perceptions of the overall communications climate. When mean values for the Immediate Supervisor Index were correlated with the mean values of the total measuring instrument, the results showed a high degree of association (Pearson correlation coefficient=.67, p >.01). The same is true for the relationship between the Publisher Index and total score (Pearson correlation coefficient=.61, p >.01).

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

There are a number of conclusions that can be drawn from the results of this study--some specifically related to "Southwestern Newspapers" and others related to organizational communication in general.

It is clear that "Southwestern Newspapers" can improve its overall communications climate by increasing the amount and frequency of internal communication at all levels using a variety a channels--face-to-face, meetings, memos, etc. Further, communication climate perceptions can be strengthened by continuing to improve on the already slightly positive perceptions that there is follow-up on information sent within the organization.

Also, the results of this study reveal there are some distinct perceptual differences among the various departments of "Southwestern Newspapers." A print media organization is more

than just a newsroom and if any segment is not "healthy," the organization as a whole suffers.

However, the importance of newsroom employee perceptions should not be minimized. And, in fact, the newsroom is the one department at "Southwestern Newspapers" where communication-related perceptions of the Immediate Supervisor and the Publisher are at their lowest. Consequently, it is here that "Southwestern Newspapers" should begin efforts to improve those perceptions within the organization.

As for these Immediate Supervisor/Top Management perceptions, the results of this study confirm findings in earlier newspaper organization studies that the Immediate Supervisor-subordinate relationship is important. Further, this study adds evidence to the contention of Pincus et al. (1988) that the Top Management-Subordinate relationship is equally important.

In the case of "Southwestern Newspapers," this is the organizational communication relationship most in need of help. Specifically, the results of this study suggest the Publisher needs to develop strategies that will rebuild personal and organizational trust in his communication in a hurry. It is difficult to believe that organizational effectiveness (and hence, the quality of its products and services) can be maintained in such a communications climate.

While the results and conclusions of this study are based on data gathered in a case study of one newspaper organization, and as such are difficult to generalize to other situations, they

nevertheless can serve as a basis for several recommendations for those concerned about the function of media organizations within our society.

First, media organization managers should be encouraged to undertake communication audits similar to the one partially reported in this paper. Gaziano and Coulson (1987) found upper level newspaper managers were the ones least aware of dissatisfaction with their leadership. The same may be true for evaluations of communication within media organizations and, as this study demonstrates, the investigation of communication variables independent of other variables (such as job satisfaction) can yield a great deal of useful information. It is a credit to the Publisher of "Southwestern Newspapers" that he sought and funded such a comprehensive investigation of the communication climate within his organization.

Second, mass media researchers should be encouraged to develop the expertise necessary to provide such communication audits. It is particularly important for those familiar with media organizations to undertake this research because, as DeWine and James (1988) say, it is necessary to have a clear understanding of how the organization works in order to make specific and realistic recommendations.

Third, media organization managers at all levels and in all departments should be trained in how to use the results of such audits to manage effectively. In his study of small newspaper organizations (the size of "Southwestern Newspapers") Tharp

(1988) found that in spite of many years of job experience, two-thirds of newsroom supervisors had not received any specific management training. The same may be true for other departments in a print media organization.

This last recommendation was implemented at "Southwestern Newspapers" by meeting collectively and individually with all managerial personnel in order to develop strategies and techniques needed to improve the organizational communication climate.

One of these strategies calls for an evaluation in the form of another audit within 18 to 24 months of the first one. If, as expected, "Southwestern Newspapers" chooses to undertake such a venture, the results can be used to help this media organization move confidently into the next decade.

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TABLE 1

"SOUTHWESTERN NEWSPAPERS" EMPLOYEE PERCEPTIONS OF COMMUNICATION CLIMATE DIMENSIONS

Dimension	Mean
Amount of information received on various topics	2.72
Amount of information wanted on various topics	3.96
Amount of information sent	2.90
Amount of information want to send	3.51
Amount of information received from various sources	2.62
Amount of information want to receive from various sources	3.50
Amount of information received through various channels	2.83
Amount of information wanted through various channels	3.61
Follow-up/Action taken on information sent	3.01
Organizational communication relationships	2.96

Scale: 1=Very Little, 2=Little, 3=Some, 4=Great, 5=Very Great

TABLE 2

"SOUTHWESTERN NEWSPAPERS" EMPLOYEE PERCEPTIONS OF ITEMS RELATING TO BOSS/IMMEDIATE SUPERVISOR

Item	Mean
Amount of information received now from my boss or immediate supervisor	3.17
Amount of information I want to receive from my boss or immediate supervisor	4.19
Amount of action/follow-up taken on information I send my boss or immediate supervisor	3.24
To what extent is information you receive from your boss or immediate supervisor usually:	
Timely (you get information when you need it, not too early or too late)	3.08
Accurate (you can trust the information, it is generally believable)	3.45
Useful (you can use the information)	3.48
Excessive (you receive more than you can readily understand or use)	1.98
Extent to which you trust your boss or immediate supervisor	3.40
Extent to which your boss or immediate supervisor is honest with you	3.44
Extent to which your boss or immediate supervisor listens to what you say	3.18
Extent to which you are free to disagree with your boss or immediate supervisor	2.94

(Continued)

Scale: 1=Very Little, 2=Little, 3=Some, 4=Great, 5=Very Great

TABLE 2 (Continued)

"SOUTHWESTERN NEWSPAPERS" EMPLOYEE PERCEPTIONS OF ITEMS RELATING TO BOSS/IMMEDIATE SUPERVISOR

Item	Mean
Extent to which your boss or immediate supervisor praises you when you do a good job	2.70
Extent to which your boss or immediate supervisor strives to maintain warm and friendly relations with subordinates	3.05
Extent to which your boss or immediate supervisor understands your job needs	3.07
Extent to which your relationship with your boss or immediate supervisor contributes to your satisfaction with the organization	3.54

Scale: 1=Very Little, 2=Little, 3=Some, 4=Great, 5=Very Great

TABLE 3

"SOUTHWESTERN NEWSPAPERS" EMPLOYEE PERCEPTIONS OF ITEMS RELATING TO THE PUBLISHER

Item	Mean
Amount of information received now from the publisher	1.85
Amount of information want to receive from publisher	3.10
Amount of action/follow-up taken on information I send the publisher	2.36
To what extent is information you receive from the publisher usually:	
Timely (you get information when you need it, not too early or too late)	2.35
Accurate (you can trust the information, it is generally believable)	2.94
Useful (you can use the information)	2.74
Excessive (you receive more than you can readily understand or use)	1.95
Extent to which you trust the publisher	2.74
Extent to which the publisher is sincere in his communication with employees	2.69
Extent to which your relationship with the publisher contributes to your satisfaction with the organization	2.35

Scale: 1=Very Little, 2=Little, 3=Some, 4=Great, 5=Very Great

TABLE 4

"SOUTHWESTERN NEWSPAPERS" EMPLOYEE PERCEPTIONS OF BOSS-IMMEDIATE SUPERVISOR AND PUBLISHER BY DEPARTMENT

Department	Boss/Supervisor Index Mean	Publisher Index Mean
Advertising Sales	3.27	2.60
Circulation	3.06	2.34
Composition	3.19	2.79
Distribution	3.13	3.00
Editorial	2.81	2.54
Office/Clerical	3.39	3.34
Press	3.06	2.43

Scale: 1=Very Little, 2=Little, 3=Some, 4=Great, 5=Very Great